

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY

ARMING USAF SENIOR LEADERS WITH WORDS TO WIN

by

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Master of Science, Engineering Management

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF OPERATIONAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

March 2016

Distribution A: Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited.

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ABSTRACT

Since September 11 2001, the US government has focused its energy and defensive capabilities on countering the spread of Islamic radical extremists and their brand of terrorism. Over the last 15 years of continued engagement in this effort, policymakers have learned many lessons. Most importantly, the Global War on Terrorism requires a multifaceted approach to undermine the ideology of radical extremists rather than merely applying kinetic action against physical targets. This radicalization -- the demand for the overthrow of state governments -- derives from an ideology used in recruiting, motivating and validating terrorist activities. In a war against this ideology, or the “war of ideas” in common parlance, precise communication conveys effects more important than any weapon currently used in this engagement. The question then becomes what does the US Air Force (USAF) do to arm our frontline personnel to counter the war of ideas with the training, and the vocabulary to properly fight a communication battle? To determine the availability of this toolset for leaders (or its viable utility as an option for implementation) this research looks at the current training provided to both senior leaders in the USAF and to the personnel that support them in their communication processes. Through review of strategy recommendations, interviews, and course content examination, this research explores existing training, and any opportunities for implementing this toolset. The findings indicate that the Air Force currently focuses a lot of time and energy into creating credible, appropriate strategic messaging across multiple forms of media. However, the effects fail to emphasize the power of effective vocabulary. Therefore, overcoming this deficiency could provide successful gains in countering an ideology that preaches violence.

Arming USAF Leaders With the Words to Win

Since September 11 2001, the US government has focused its energy and defensive capabilities on countering the spread of Islamic radical extremists and their brand of terrorism. Over the last 15 years of continued engagement in this effort, policymakers have learned many lessons. Most importantly, the Global War on Terrorism requires a multifaceted approach to undermine the ideology of radical extremists rather than merely applying kinetic action against physical targets. This radicalization -- the demand for the overthrow of state governments -- derives from an ideology used in recruiting, motivating and validating terrorist activities. In a war against this ideology, or the “war of ideas” in common parlance, precise communication conveys effects more important than any weapon currently used in this engagement. The question which deserves exploration then becomes “ how does the US Air Force (USAF) train and arm our frontline communicators with the vocabulary necessary to properly fight the communication battle?” To determine the availability of this toolset for leaders (or its viable utility as an option for implementation) this research looks at the importance of communicating accurately, as well as the current training provided to both senior leaders in the USAF and to the personnel that support them in their communication processes. Through review of strategy recommendations, interviews, and course content examination, this research explores existing training, and any opportunities for implementing this toolset. The findings indicate that the Air Force currently focuses a lot of time and energy into creating credible, appropriate strategic messaging across multiple forms of media. However, the effort fails to emphasize the power of effective vocabulary. Therefore, overcoming this deficiency could provide successful gains in countering an ideology that preaches violence.

Why this solution?

Violent extremists must justify their actions to mobilize support in finances, soldiers and political recognition. This justification requires that potential supporters understand and accept the ideas, ideology and identity that the extremists offer. All of these tools of mobilization require the skillful use of words. Words are both the weapons and soldiers in the struggle for ideas and political legitimacy. Therefore this justifies an examination to determining the ideas and resources presented in curricula through various established USAF avenues to arm frontline communicators. Captured in the findings of the 9/11 Commission on the response strategy to counter radical Islamic extremism, foreign policy advisor, Richard Holbrooke, was quoted as saying “how is a man in a cave out-communicating the world’s largest communicator?”¹

Despite the complexity of this issue; however, J. Michel Waller offered one part of the solution set in his book “Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War.” He argues that both the media and US leaders contributed to the legitimacy of the radical Islamic cause by using Muslim terms in a way that they determined. Essentially, by using the same words that the extremists use to describe themselves, in a language that US officials did not fully comprehend, the United States in essence supported the claims of Osama Bin Laden and his network. In essence, militants have hijacked Islamic terms with great symbol value to support and defend al-Qaeda’s actions and cast the West as infidels. Osama Bin Laden claims that the United States has engaged in a global war against Islam as a whole. Waller suggests that the United States should use appropriate “Arabic and Muslim terms to denounce the terrorists as sociopaths instead of holy warriors.”²

In their article, “Choosing words carefully: Language to Help Fight Islamic Terrorism” Dr Streusand and Lt Col Tunnell lay out appropriate vocabulary words that would more accurately describe the Islamic radical extremists, as they are seen by other followers of Islam,

which would contribute to undermining their credibility. They recommend using terms such as *hirabah* which refers to those people engaged in sinful warfare, and the term *mufsidun* which refers to an evil or corrupt person.³ In sum, these authors suggest that military and political leaders must use the right words appropriately in all the messaging of the coalition of partners trying to defeat Islamic terrorist groups.⁴

Additionally, a Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism, recommended that President Obama's administration consider how to "employ nuanced and non-combative language."⁵ In their recommendation, the Task Force suggests getting away from terms like "Muslim world" and "war on terror" which indicate battle lines drawn between the Middle East and the West. Such broad terms implicate all who live in that region as somehow tainted by the behavior of Islamic radical extremists. The Task Force claims that referring to the Middle East as a singular "Muslim world" reinforces the narratives promoted by groups like al-Qaeda.⁶

In 2012, Antunez and Tellidis reinforced the inherent power of vocabulary for combating radical Islamic extremists. They lamented the deficiency of "terminology surrounding Islam-related Terrorism."⁷ Based on their research, the authors argued that using the wrong terms tends to alienate moderate segments within the Muslim community and creates obstacles for countering radicalization efforts.⁸ Finally, General Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the Joint Combined Staff, stated regarding the struggle against violent extremism "until we can define the threat in totality and find the right vocabulary... we can not defeat the threat, at best, we can hope to contain it."⁹ Therefore, using a precise vocabulary plays an important instrumental role in the overall communication operations that must be a part of countering the radical Islamic ideology. The overall communication process requires an understanding of the

message from those sending it and those that are receiving it. Communication can fail when leaders use the wrong words.

Science and military journals have devoted attention to the art and science of communication for decades. New studies continue to reveal how people can communicate better and more clearly. In the 21st century, communication technology has changed the landscape of how people communicate, what people communicate, and how often. But the importance of the message has not changed. It has become especially important -- with the shortened time span of messages going from sender to receiver and the variety of audiences that can now access any message -- that successful communicators use concise and accurate vocabulary. When competing senders (the United States and the radical Islamic extremists) send contrasting messages to the same audience (in this instance it would be the Muslim populations of Middle Eastern countries and around the world) the message that successfully resonates and persuades the audience will be the one that uses the right vocabulary.

In 1960, David Berlo identified ten components of communication. His model stresses the dynamic nature of communication as a process connecting a sender and a receiver who each try to influence the other.¹⁰ Berlo's model defines the message component as the encoded thought (or idea put into symbols or words) sent from the sender to receiver for a purpose of influence. How the receiver decodes the message as received affects the response.¹¹ If the receiver incorrectly decodes the message based on meaning and assumptions derived from his or her cultural context, it may lose its influence entirely. Therefore, according to Berlo's basic model of communicating if US officials want to succeed in communicating they consider how the receivers of words in the message will understand it or decode it. Streusand and Tunnell call this "using precise words precisely."¹²

Many people who get their news from western news sources understand the word *jihad* in the manner defined by the Islamic radical extremists as military action against non-Muslims to extend the control of Islam. The media coverage of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1970s first introduced this word and this meaning into the US lexicon.¹³ This understanding completely contradicts the behavior of today's militants manifested as the killing all non-believers.¹⁴ However, all Muslim hold a personal duty to commit true *jihad*, meaning striving on the path of God defined in terms of personal, internal struggle of faith. Therefore, when USAF leaders use the word *jihad* when speaking of the Islamic radical extremist definition, they provide legitimacy to that definition and neglect or disavow the first meaning.

Classical Islamic doctrine presents two versions of struggle: the greater inner struggle and the lesser outer struggle of physical combat. The latter also consists of two forms: 1) offensive war permitted under restrictive conditions, including authorization by a caliph or sovereign; and 2) defensive fighting under force of necessity as an individual duty.¹⁵ Unfortunately, as the Global War on Terrorism unfolded in the years just after 2001, the western media frequently quoted the National Security Advisor and Vice President repeating how the enemy was “committed to jihad” and were “motivated by an intense desire to commit jihad.” These expressions therefore legitimize a use of the term employed by radical Islamic extremists and contrary to classical Islamic doctrine.¹⁶

After 15 years of engagement, all political and military leaders should now understand the definitions of the Islamic terms they use and should be prepared to provide accurate, concise communication to a worldwide audience. This increases the importance for USAF leaders to know how to use the correct terms for expressing US objectives, opportunities, explanations or instructions. The saying “words matter” has become more true now than ever before because our savvy enemies will exploit any wrong statement to promote their cause. For example, leaders

should use the Arabic term *hirabah* (as defined earlier) to define the actions that the Islamic radical extremists actually carry out. This term goes beyond the FBI definition of terrorism and accounts for both the directed and the coincidental spread of fear.¹⁷ By using this term, US messaging will resonate more clearly with peaceful Muslims and will force the Islamic radical extremists to try to disprove this characterization, casting a shadow on their legitimacy. Waller points out that a thousand years of Islamic jurisprudence has already provided this appropriate term and therefore it can be used without misunderstanding in the Arabic language speaking countries.¹⁸ Additionally he suggests that adding vocabulary requires no beaurocratic re-organization nor would it require a huge budget investment and therefore should be embraced sooner than later.¹⁹ Since this vocabulary exists and was identified in various sources as early as 2006, it raises the question, “What role does the Department of Defense (DoD) and the USAF have in communicating to worldwide audiences, and are they prepared for it?”

The DoD and USAF hold a responsibility to communicate planning and actionable messages, as a subset of the activity of the whole of government, in coordination with the other instruments of national power. The Department of State (DoS) holds the primary responsibility for US strategic communication, or what they term, public diplomacy. In the *2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (QDDR), then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote “the QDDR endorses a new public diplomacy strategy that makes public engagement every diplomat’s duty”²⁰ She also advocated for and established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication, because she felt that the DoS must emphasize strategic communication in all its work.²¹

Since 2001 the DoS has struggled to find a messaging strategy that works.²² A recent article outlines at least four failed campaigns designed to counter the extremist ideology. Efforts ranged from an initial campaign to illustrate US and Muslim “Shared Values” to the most recent

efforts to mock ISIS with a YouTube video called “Welcome to ISIS Land.”²³ The latest restructure within the government will give DoS the lead in the newly formed Violent Extremist Council, with representatives from other agencies in a supporting role.²⁴ In light of those DoS efforts, as regularly noted in lessons learned over 15 years in combating terrorism around the world, the DoS lacks the resources in both personnel and budget to accomplish this mission alone. The DoD retains the largest budget, manpower pool and flexibility in the US government.²⁵ According to the slogan “US diplomacy wears combat boots” the DoD has adopted this mission set by default and seeks to fulfill the duty through its own organization.²⁶

In most regional contexts, the DoD has deployed the largest group of US personnel and has most “frontline” communicators carrying forward the message of the US in both action and words. Therefore, the DoD and specifically the USAF would benefit by using the appropriate vocabulary during key operations in the “war of ideas,” where the battlefield is most contested: the realm of words and ideas. As a relatively new and growing element of military operations, the DoD defines Strategic Communication in Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* as

Focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power²⁷

Adhering to this definition to strengthen or preserve conditions requires accurate strategic messaging as strategy and tactics. As in any hierarchical organization, the more the leaders focus on and expect action on a subject, the lower down the chain of command the expectation and execution extends. In sum, the DoD has stated at a doctrinal level that strategic communication must be done, the USAF has guidance as to why and how it should be planned.

Therefore, commanders at the Major Command (MAJCOM) and Combatant Command (COCOM) level must devise ways to actually implement strategic communications into their day to day operations.

In 2009, Lt Col Burgstein published a study explaining with various examples dating as far back as the Berlin Airlift how communication and information components of a plan can make or break the overall effort.²⁸ However, the actual employment and reinforcement of doing communication operations remains relatively nebulous. The military now understands the imperative of communication and information operations in planning operations at all levels of the military.

In his extensive book on the subject, Christopher Paul identifies the challenges that lay before the DoD in defining, comprehending and implementing strategic communications daily. These include: legal constraints, balancing short-, medium, and long-term goals, lack of doctrine, and competing parochial interests.²⁹ Although many challenges exist, messaging remains key in operations, especially those aimed directly at countering ideology. Given the status of strategic messaging as an accepted requirement, and an annex of any operational plan, how does the USAF explicitly prepare its leaders to communicate effectively?

How is the USAF arming its Senior Leaders?

In 2009 the USAF established the AF Center for Strategic Leadership Communications (AFCSLC). The USAF assigned this office a responsibility to infuse strategic communication in training courses for Field Grade Officers and Senior Enlisted members.³⁰ Initially the AFCLSC was led by Public Affairs professionals to prepare senior leaders for media engagements specifically. Today the AFCSLC retains some of that background, but has been forced to extend into the areas listed above. Nearly each school contacted and curriculum accessed for this project listed strategic communication as a topic of learning or course objective, which indicates

a measure of success to date for the AFCSLC. However, the overall direction of the communication lessons taught, discussed, and set into action tends to focus entirely on communication within the USAF and stresses synchronizing messages from the strategic level down to the tactical level.

The AFCSLC supports four courses that routinely instruct officers, spanning from mid-career Majors to Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel senior leaders moving up to the Group Commander, Wing Commander, Contingency Commander and Flag officer positions. Each of these courses provides a small amount of time for discussion of strategic communication. From a firsthand perspective going through the class as a mid-career Major, I can attest to the short lesson, focused on learning how to communicate a message pushed out by USAF strategic leaders down to the tactical level unit personnel. That was the total content of the quick two hours of instruction provided. The lesson briefly mentioned choosing words carefully so that your audience would understand your intent and choosing words that would lend credibility and authenticity.

According to the personnel at the AFCSLC, strategic communication instruction in the Group and Wing Commanders' courses concentrates on discussing how to improve communications within a USAF unit. These senior leader courses discuss communication strategies in an audience driven context dealing with social media messaging about Wing programs. Additionally, the instructors introduce ideas on how to invite two-way communication within the USAF unit environment. The AFCSLC provide some media tips on interacting or speaking in the local community.³¹ Additionally the Group Commander Course director mentioned that this particular course discusses vocabulary in the block designated for medical officers, specifically when dealing with medical terms or with very emotional events.³²

These two courses focuses on day-to-day Group and Wing level command and control, not necessarily on how to discuss their role in the ongoing global war effort.³³

Overall this research has found that the programs supported by the AFSCLC generally fail to discuss vocabulary selection for audiences with different cultural backgrounds. It does not prepare leaders for the type of strategic communication needed in the war of ideas, should they find themselves in that situation.

In addition, in two other, separately hosted courses one would expect to find discussions on proper terms and appropriate vocabulary. These are contingency training courses, meaning the training that a senior leader receives just before moving into a leadership position within the area of responsibility of the warfighters. The USAF Center for Language and Culture hosts a weeklong course called General Officer Pre-Deployment Acculturation Course. It provides specific culture and language insight into a region or country for leaders going to that area of responsibility. This course includes some language training basics as well as negotiating and cultural sensitivity training to prepare senior officers. However, according to the syllabus, the five lessons on language only teach enough to “satisfy courtesy requirements and simple face to face conversations.”³⁴ The course provides some cultural foundations to the mission, such as understanding the perspective of others to account for second-order effects, and working with a translator in cross-cultural communication situations. The syllabus does not indicate any training on dealing with the media or press, nor does it provide time designated for lessons on vocabulary recommendations to fully explain opposing perspective interpretations.³⁵

USAF Central Command (AFCENT) hosts another course designed for specifically for senior leaders before they deploy to lead operations in the Middle East region. The curriculum of this class provides an introduction to acquaint leaders with the AFCENT staff functions and personnel so they “know faces and understand specific staff processes.”³⁶ The staff in the

command designed the course to serve their internal organizational needs. The fact that it is not driven by any outside agency or derived out of doctrine, demonstrates that the command views this course important enough to host. This course includes no discussion of vocabulary that should be used, or avoided, if holding a press conference, granting an interview, or engaging with key leaders.³⁷

This review of all the courses identified for senior leaders leads to the conclusion that once officers reach the field grade officer ranks and hold command billets they have either gained the lexicon required through years of experience, or (most likely) they rely on the expertise of the staff working for them to provide those specifics if and when required. This leads to a follow-on question, “how much the training do the information specialists supporting senior leaders have in providing the most precise and meaningful words for various engagements?”

Exploring the training path of Air Force media and information specialists, the Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) provides insight into what preparations the staff gains to assist senior leaders. Joint doctrine identifies the roles and responsibilities of PAOs, to include the requirement to provide counsel to commanders, coordinate communication integration and alignment, as well as support community and key leader engagements.³⁸ A robust and progressive set of courses prepare PAOs for these responsibilities, and set these professionals up as the critical advisors on whom commanders rely. A single integrated DoD center, the Defense Information School provides all of these courses. This school teaches “Airmanship, leadership and professionalism to build combat power for the US Air Force.”³⁹ Therefore, theoretically this school would incorporate opportunities to discuss the virtues and defects of specific vocabulary for USAF officers to use in communicating with various public audiences at home and abroad to improve combat effectiveness. PAOs in the field now, observe that a relatively young PAO

(typically 0-3 and below) with anywhere between two to six years of experience under their belt serves at the Wing level, supporting the Group and Wing Commander echelons.⁴⁰ Assuming they've completed the first course in their career field progression, they would have the basics of reporting and journalism under their belt, but nothing that points to drafting comprehensive communications plans or incorporating the most current or desired vocabulary to nest, or synchronize, their Commanders' messages with those being drafted at higher headquarters.⁴¹ Additionally, the PAOs interviewed for this project acknowledged that the personalities of the Group and Wing Commanders drive the words or tone of messages drafted, leaving minimal opportunities for PAOs to influence the vocabulary used.⁴²

In the intermediate level PAO course taught at the Defense Information school, PAOs receive training on military communication capabilities, how to explain non-kinetic operations, how to advise commanders and the proper role of media operations in joint operations according to the syllabus for the course.⁴³ Perhaps the most interesting topic included in this course toward this research effort, is the lesson on cultural influences on inter-cultural communications. The curriculum includes advising commanders in choosing appropriate wording for credibility and authenticity, but not specific vocabulary for the “war on ideas.”⁴⁴

The curriculum director at the school mentioned the selective character of this class, consisting of approximately 48 PAOs in the grade 0-3 to 0-5 from all branches of service, which is 87% of the overall number of PAOs identified by the services as needing this level of training. Additionally, the course director specified that the PAO career progression plan does not typically include this course but rather only selected officers receive it as an additional opportunity.⁴⁵ He noted that the depth of lessons like these on culture, rely heavily on the experience of the instructors to compliment the official curriculum material. The currency of the

material, and any room for discussion of vocabulary recommendations, must come from the background of the instructors.⁴⁶

A separate course targeted to senior level PAOs, (0-5 rank), teaches principles such as ethical considerations, internal and external cultural dynamics, and the interplay of US government agencies. This course prepares the PAO going into a role of senior communication counselors.⁴⁷ This course employs case studies to demonstrate successes and failures in building or maintaining credibility, and reviews solutions for “frontline communicators” to draft and synchronize messages.⁴⁸ The Defense Information School strives to meet the service needs and puts 48 PAOs through this course each year prior to moving over to the area of responsibility and the front lines.⁴⁹ The Joint Staff has requested this approximate number annually, however based on increased requirements the school is looking to increase that quota to reach 100% of requested billets (60 students) in the upcoming years.⁵⁰ As with other career fields, most PAOs that deploy do not attend this specialized course without going to the area of operations.

Like the senior leader courses, this school offers separate courses to prepare PAOs for contingency environments outside of the expertise gained in the intermediate course. The Joint Contingency training course emphasizes operational planning and integrating PA support into the joint staff functions.⁵¹ AFCENT specifically, allows PAOs the opportunity to attend the same senior leader training course enroute to their deployed assignment, which again covers the staff and its assigned personnel.⁵² Overall PAOs receive plenty of opportunities to gain culturally sensitive vocabulary training that could, or should, be used in constructing messages for commanders. However, it does not seem like the school has embraced this opportunity up to now. According to the director interviewed for this research, the school seeks to fulfill training requirements specifically requested by the commanders in the field, but these commanders have not yet identified the need for training in specific or different vocabulary for strategic messaging.

Also, various courses teach PAOs repeatedly to use the same themes and messages that higher echelons of command use. Therefore, until the vocabulary at the President and cabinet level changes, the USAF has to follow their example and cannot change the lexicon on its own.⁵³

Another team of DoD public affairs experts, collectively known as the Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE), based out of the Washington DC area, consists of rapidly deployable PAOs available to support Joint Task Force commanders and their staff on a short notice for special circumstances like exercises or new deployments. This team is prepared to handle strategic level communications, by generating release statements and strategic communication plans to enhance the operational effects desired by the JTF commander.⁵⁴ Although their website does not specify the type of tasks the team undertakes specifically, this team seems small enough that it could make changes to its operational guidance, and include changes like more relevant and current vocabulary for use in future exercise scenarios and then apply them in real world engagements.

What does this mean for the future?

Overall, the USAF offers many courses to prepare senior leaders and PAOs for day-to-day command and control missions. However, the curriculum includes only very limited time for discussions of strategic communication. The allotment fails to adequately address the role of vocabulary in messaging. If the USAF can embrace the idea that words can be more critical than bombs in the “war of ideas,” then it should look to update some of the training so that their leaders can wield both. The USAF already possesses the infrastructure to host courses, the opportunities for the education of military officers, and the public affairs specialists that support them. According to a common understanding, each course has only enough time allocated to cover the material in their curriculum. This goal justifies a review to identify material that can be replaced. The USAF could lead the conversation for DoD changes, or even boldly move

forward to test a path that would support DoD and national policy changes. To a larger purpose, the DoD must continue to develop the concept of strategic communication to support activity at the lower levels.

Multiple perspectives within the DoD show the importance of Strategic Communication and support slowing the development of this useful weapon. Communication and information operations have become integrated into planning, but USAF leaders have yet to accept communication as a weapon in the ideological fight. In his book, *Strategic Communication*, Christopher Paul suggests that the kinetic orientation of current and previous generations of senior leaders drives them to prefer action over what they perceive as “mere talking.”⁵⁵ For example, in 2009 then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullens wrote an article arguing that the US should communicate its intent through actions.⁵⁶ In contrast, however, many official documents demonstrate the importance of strategic communications, specifically in the Global War on Terrorism. The 2006 QDR states, “a victory in the long war ultimately depends on strategic communication by the US and its partners.”⁵⁷ More recently, a Lt Col Burgstein published a second document arguing that the DoD must take a more proactive approach to communication or they “allow the enemy to dominate the narrative” and suffer a significant disadvantage in today’s type of asymmetric warfare⁵⁸ The research conducted here demonstrates the reality of this description for the DoD today.

None of the courses designed to train senior leaders for engagement or messaging include precise vocabulary that can accurately articulate the message needed to undermine the ideology of the Islamic radical extremists. The DoD and DoS both have roles to play in articulating the US strategic messages to international populations. The sooner that the USAF and the DoD as a whole adopt precise vocabulary in the content of its messages, the more effective US influence can become as a weapon against the ideology being spread by radical extremists preaching

violence in the name of their religion. The current war of ideas relies on messages that spread around the world at the click of a mouse as its weapons. The United States and its allies have great potential to adequately contest that message with credible messaging coming from official sources on the frontline of the action.

Notes:

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³⁴ Air Force Cultural Language Center (AFCLC), “General Officer Pre-Deployment Acculturation Course Syllabus”, provided by Mr William Dulaney, (AFCLC, Maxwell AFB, AL), 22 February 2016.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Mr Walter Bracewell, (AF Central Command, Operations Training Directorate, Shaw AFB, SC), interview by author, 12 February 2016.

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